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ABSTRACT

The goals and aspirations of 35,950 students who had attended Maryland community colleges were surveyed 18 months after college entry. For first-time credit students who entered college during fall 1982, comparisons were made of two groups who returned usable responses to mailed questionnaires. The first group consisted of 5,133 students who were still enrolled in spring 1985 (currently enrolled or continuing) and the second group consisted of 6,360 students who were not currently enrolled (nonreturning). The statewide and campus followup of students used questionnaires and student records to provide information on: why students attend community colleges, program of study, how they evaluate colleges, credit hours earned at the college, grade point average, employment, student satisfaction, sex and race, year of birth, why some did not return, and how the colleges can help students accomplish individual goals. The typical respondent was white, female, and 29 years old and had enrolled in either transfer or occupational programs. It was found that nearly 67% of currently enrolled students wished to obtain either a college certificate or degree compared to 42% among nonreturning respondents. The nonreturning students gave conflict with job, educational goal achievement, and insufficient funds as the main reasons for not returning to college. (SW)

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PERCEPTIONS AND PERFORMANCE OF CURRENTLY ENROLLED AND NOT CURRENTLY ENROLLED STUDENTS: RESULTS OF A COOPERATIVE EFFORT AMONG COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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This paper was presented at the Twenty-Sixth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Marriott Orlando World Center, Orlando, Florida, June 22-25, 1986. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Ann K. Dickey, Chair
Forum Publications Editorial
Advisory Committee

ABSTRACT

The research project is a joint effort of the individual Maryland community colleges and the State Board for Community Colleges. The study, conducted 18 months after the students entered the community college, helps to understand the goals and aspirations of the students. Also, it helps evaluate the extent to which the college has assisted students in achieving their educational goals and in their career development. The statewide and campus follow-up studies of students are necessary tools in understanding why students attend community colleges, what program areas they represent, how they evaluate the colleges, why some did not return, and how the colleges can help students accomplish their individual goals. In addition, data from these studies are important elements in the program evaluation system utilized by the State coordinating bodies, in each college's ongoing self-examination, and in periodic accreditation studies. The study group consisted of Currently Enrolled (Continuing) and Not Currently Enrolled (Non-Returning) Students. The significance, feasibility, and generalizability of the study at the state level are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Statewide follow-up surveys of first-time entrants and graduates have been conducted in Maryland community colleges since 1971. Regular feedback from students has helped each of the 17 colleges to strengthen programs and services for students and to plan for the future. These surveys have also helped in providing current information on employment and transfer success, and the level of student satisfaction with instruction and services.

Unlike previous entrant studies, which surveyed students four years after they entered the college, this survey had occurred approximately 18 months after they first entered the college. The shorter period would provide a better response rate and more relevant data from students who have had a more recent experience with the college. This population was divided into two categories: students who were still enrolled in Spring 1984 (currently enrolled or continuing) and students who were not enrolled in Spring 1984 (not currently enrolled or non-returning). These two populations were compared to determine how they differed from each other.

METHODOLOGY

Study Population

The study population consisted of first-time credit students who entered Maryland community colleges during Fall 1982. This population of 35,950 students included all students taking credit courses in occupational, transfer, and undeclared degree or certificate programs. Each college used student records to develop a master list of its study population. All colleges surveyed the entire first-time entrant population.

Data Collection and Procedures

Two survey instruments, one for currently enrolled and the other for not currently enrolled, were developed by the Maryland Community College Research Group and included common questions on goals and goal achievement, employment, and student satisfaction. Some questions were different so as to elicit information that was specific to the group.

In addition to the student responses to the questionnaires, the following information on each student was supplied directly from college records: program of study, credit hours earned at the college, overall grade point average, sex, year of birth, and race.

The State Board for Community Colleges printed the questionnaires and distributed them to each college for mailing. Each college used student records to produce mailing labels and a master list of its study population. The questionnaires were mailed to the students by the colleges with an accompanying cover letter from the President. A second mailing was made to non-respondents approximately two weeks after the first mailing.

The questionnaires were returned to the colleges where the additional college-provided data were added. The questionnaires were then returned to the State Board for Community Colleges where the data were entered into a computer file and analyzed using The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (Nie, Hull, Jenkins Steinbrenner, & Bent (1981)). Each community college was provided the results for their college, along with the cohort and systemwide aggregate results. The original questionnaires were returned to the colleges.

Response Rate

Among the 35,950 students, 11,196 represented currently enrolled and 24,754 represented not currently enrolled. The numbers of returned usable questionnaires for the two groups were 5,133 and 6,360 respectively. The response rate for currently enrolled was 46 percent and the rate for not currently enrolled was 27 percent.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the currently enrolled respondents and compares these characteristics to those of not currently enrolled respondents. The typical 1982 entrant (both currently and not currently enrolled), was white, female, and 29 years old. He/she had enrolled in either a transfer or occupational program. Almost 60 percent of non-returning students had earned six credits or less compared to only 12 percent of the currently enrolled students. One-third of the non-returning students had less than 2.00 grade point average compared to 18 percent of currently enrolled students earning this average. However, almost equal percent (45%) of both the groups had GPA between 3.00 and 4.00.

Table 1

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

Characteristic	Currently Enrolled		Not Currently Enrolled	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Sex				
Male	1,938	37.8	2,248	35.4
Female	3,194	62.2	4,109	64.6
Race				
White	3,904	82.2	4,423	81.8
Black	574	12.1	760	14.1
Other	273	5.7	221	4.1
Program Type				
Transfer	2,343	47.8	2,718	49.6
Occupational	2,555	52.2	2,763	50.4
Highest Degree Earned				
Less than High School	105	2.1	341	5.7
High School	4,048	81.4	3,662	61.0
College Certificate	87	1.7	101	1.7
Associate	71	1.4	170	2.8
BA Degree	245	4.9	795	13.2
Above BA	320	8.5	938	15.6
Credits Earned				
None	177	3.5	1,055	16.7
1 - 6	416	8.1	2,649	42.0
7 - 15	1,105	21.8	1,297	20.5
16+	3,380	66.6	1,315	20.8
Grade Point Average				
0 - 1.99	890	17.8	2,079	33.3
2.00 - 2.99	1,864	37.3	1,294	20.7
3.00 - 4.00	2,246	44.9	2,878	46.0

Status of Entrants

In 1984, eighteen months after they had first attended the community college, 72 percent of currently enrolled and 77 percent of non-returning students were employed either full-time or part-time. Twenty-three percent of non-returning students were enrolled in another college or university. Twenty-one percent of currently enrolled and 18 percent not currently enrolled had full-time home responsibilities or were seeking work. Among those who were employed, almost an equal percent (56%) of currently enrolled and not currently enrolled had their jobs before coming to the community college. Forty-four percent of the currently enrolled and only 11 percent of not currently enrolled obtained jobs while attending the community college. One-third of the non-returning students got employment after leaving the community college.

Over one-half of all respondents, both currently and not currently enrolled, reported their employment being directly or somewhat related to their program of study at the college.

Educational Goals

Students attend the community college for a variety of reasons: to prepare for a new career, to prepare for transfer to a four-year college, to explore new areas, for personal interest and self-enrichment, and to update skills. Data from Table 2 indicate that 20 percent of non-returning students come to the college for either updating skills or for personal interest and self-enrichment compared to 10 percent of currently enrolled students.

Table 2

EDUCATIONAL GOALS OF ENTRANTS

Primary Goal	Currently Enrolled		Not Currently Enrolled	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Prepare for Career	841	16.5	730	11.6
Prepare for Transfer	1,264	24.8	1,183	18.9
Career Exploration	811	15.9	1,043	16.6
Update Skills	273	5.3	646	10.3
Personal Interest & Self-Enrichment	257	5.0	625	10.0
Unknown Reason	1,660	32.5	2,045	32.6

Challenge of Course Work

The students were asked to assess the difficulty of course work at the community college. Nearly three-fourths (73 percent) of all respondents (both currently and not currently enrolled) reported the difficulty was about what they expected. In fact, a higher percentage (11 percent) of non-returning students reported the course work "easier than expected" than currently enrolled students (8 percent).

Rating of College Services

The currently enrolled students were asked to rate the college services with respect to: quality of instruction by full-time and part-time faculty, course availability, helpfulness of administrators/staff/job placement assistance, and reading/math skills improvement programs. About eight out of ten respondents rated full-time faculty from good to excellent. Seven out of ten gave this rating for part-time faculty and for college administrators/staff. Forty percent of the currently enrolled students gave good to excellent rating for reading/math skills improvement programs. A large number (50 percent) of the respondents gave no opinion for this service. This is probably due to the fact that the students did not use this service. Over two-thirds (69 percent) of all currently enrolled respondents gave good to excellent rating for the availability of courses at the community college. One-fourth of the respondents gave fair rating for this item. Only about 25 percent of the respondents rated the job placement assistance from good to excellent. Nearly two-thirds gave no opinion on this subject.

Primary Reason for Not Returning to College

The non-returning respondents gave a variety of academic, employment, financial and personal reasons for leaving the college. The primary reasons given for discontinuing attendance were: conflict with job (21%), achieved educational goal (16%), insufficient funds (15%), course not available (13%), transferred to another institution (9%), moved away from the college (8%), and others (18%).

Plan to Return to Community College

The non-returning students were asked if they plan to take more courses at that community college in the future. Forty-two percent of the respondents said they were planning to return to the college. An equal percentage of respondents were uncertain of their college plans.

Satisfaction with Instruction and College

Both currently enrolled and not currently enrolled students were asked if they were satisfied with the quality of classroom instruction and with the overall quality of the community college they attended.

A large proportion (90%) of both groups were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the quality of the instruction in their programs and with the overall quality of their college. Among those respondents who were not satisfied either with the quality of instruction or with the quality of community college, non-returning students outnumbered currently enrolled students by two to one (Table 3).

Table 3

EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTION

AND COLLEGE

Variable	Currently Enrolled	Not Currently Enrolled
Quality of Instruction	(N=5,018)	(N=6,093)
Extremely Satisfied	30.0%	34.7%
Satisfied	66.6%	57.8%
Unsatisfied	3.4%	7.6%
Overall Quality of College		
Extremely Satisfied	31.6%	29.8%
Satisfied	66.1%	65.8%
Unsatisfied	2.2%	4.4%

DISCUSSION

The central problem addressed in this study was that community colleges needed updated information about the basic outcomes of community college education. Such current information reveals why students come to the community colleges and what they did with their college education. It has long been emphasized in the literature that community college entrants must be studied because so few students graduate, and that studying graduates alone would only examine the more traditional and the academically successful students (Tschechtelin and Millman, 1978; Tschechtelin and McLean, 1980; and Campbell, et.al., 1983). This study of 1982 entrants revealed that non-returning students (not currently enrolled) did not differ from the continuing students in terms of age, sex, race, or program of study. Similar findings were reported by Heller (1982). The two groups differed significantly in terms of educational aspirations. Nearly two-thirds of all currently enrolled (continuing) respondents reported their educational goal of obtaining either a college certificate or degree compared to only 42 percent among non-returning respondents. Heller (1982) also reported the persisters having higher educational aspirations.

Both returning (currently enrolled) and non-returning (not currently enrolled) students generally rated the classroom instruction and their experiences at the college as good to excellent. Similar findings of "above average" satisfaction were reported by Slark (1978) and Donsky (1979).

The reasons for not returning to the college were varied. Conflict between work and study was the most common reason for leaving. Slark (1978) and Baker (1980) reported similar findings in their studies. Sixteen percent of the non-returning students indicated that they had achieved their educational goals. Baker (1980) reported 20 percent of the non-returning students gave this reason. The next common reason given by the students for not returning to the college was insufficient funds (15 percent). Financial problems may or may not be an underlying reason. In a study of the Minnesota State Colleges, Fenstemacher (1973) found that such reasons were related to a reluctance to apply for financial aid. However, Astin's studies (1975a and 1975b) revealed that scholarships and grants relate positively to student retention irrespective of ability.

SUMMARY

The survey of the 1982 first-time entrants, conducted 18 months later in 1984, revealed that the typical respondent (currently enrolled and not currently enrolled) was white, female, and 29 years old. He/she had enrolled in either transfer or occupational program.

The number of non-returning students who came to the college to either update skills or for personal interest and self-enrichment was twice as many as those of currently enrolled respondents. Nearly three-fourths of all currently enrolled and not currently enrolled were employed either full-time or part-time. Forty-four percent of the currently enrolled and only 11 percent of non-returning students obtained jobs while attending the community college. Over one-half of all respondents reported their employment being directly or somewhat related to their program of study at the college.

The non-returning students gave conflict with job, educational goal achievement, and insufficient funds as the main reasons for not returning to the college. Over 40 percent of these students reported plans of returning to their community college in the future.

An overwhelming majority of both currently enrolled and not currently enrolled were satisfied with the quality of classroom instruction and with the overall quality of the community college.

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